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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 3rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 24 November 1992, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. ALSTON

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (agenda item 7)(continued)

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (continued)

Belarus (E/1990/7/Add.5)(continued)

1. The CHAIRMAN invited the representative of Belarus to continue his replies to the questions put by members at the second meeting.

2. Mr. GORNAK (Belarus), replying to the questions by Mr. Muterahejuru, said that, at times, as many as 5,000 to 6,000 foreigners, especially from Africa, studied in Belarus. Formerly their education had been free of charge and no payment had been required for housing. Currently, there were no problems or incidents, except for certain financial difficulties which had arisen as a result of Belarus's entry into the market economy. Higher education institutions had decided to charge fees for foreign citizens, but those fees were considerably lower than in other countries. There had even been an increase in the number of foreign students from countries such as China and Turkey. There was no oppression of foreign citizens. Great difficulties arose, however, when students had to return home at the end of their studies, since fares had risen substantially. In a few cases, students did not wish to go home, and applications for residence were decided on a case-by-case basis.

3. Replying to Mr. Mratchkov's questions, he explained that under the Education Act it was possible to set up private schools. Such schools existed, but they were accessible only to well-off persons, since the average monthly wage was 5,777 roubles whereas the average monthly fee for a private school was 6,000 roubles. The Government considered that private schools helped to raise the level of education, although the tuition given in them had to comply with all government requirements. Classes in private schools were two or three times smaller than in State schools. There were no private universities or technical institutes. A number of new higher education institutions had been created, especially for providing specialized training and recycling in the field of management and marketing in response to Belarus's change-over to a market economy. The number of students in higher education had not fallen despite financial difficulties, and no reduction was being planned, since education was deemed to be vital for the country's future. Previously, higher education institutions had followed curricula laid down in Moscow, but they were now granted substantial autonomy. Rectors and professors were appointed by the academic staff in a secret ballot. The atmosphere in the universities was normal, although protests sometimes occurred over the low salaries. Relations among students were good. In the past graduates had been obliged to work anywhere in the Soviet Union where their services might have been needed, but that was no longer the case, the primary consideration being the internal needs of Belarus.

4. Replying to the questions raised by Mrs. Jiménez Butragueño, he said that no religious education was taught in State schools. Consideration had, however, been given to the possibility of teaching the history of religion in schools. In any case, the teaching of religion was no longer being hindered,

and religious education could be obtained at the Academy of Theology and at two seminaries. Owing to financial constraints, the situation with regard to the education of the elderly was rather complicated. In some countries it was asked why the elderly should receive education at all, but in Belarus they had access to it at evening classes and through the highly developed system of correspondence courses. In any case the literacy rate in Belarus was very high. Unfortunately, market forces were likely to have a negative impact on accessibility.

5. In reply to Mrs. Ider's questions, he explained that, pursuant to article 11 of the Constitution, foreigners enjoyed the same rights and obligations as citizens. Violations were punished by the courts. The Constitution also stated that if the laws of Belarus ran counter to a ratified treaty, the latter prevailed.

6. Mrs. Ider had inquired about the appropriations for education. In the former Soviet Union, education had been given great attention. After the Second World War, appropriations for education had amounted to between 9 and 11 per cent of budgetary resources. That policy had borne fruit: in 1957 the first sputnik had been launched and in 1961 the first man had been placed in orbit. After 1957 the experts of many advanced countries had studied the education system in the former Soviet Union and had found that the teaching of natural sciences was at a high level. However, beginning in 1963, educational reform had so mangled syllabuses that it had prompted revulsion in the young against mathematics. After 1963 education in the Soviet Union had fallen apart; budgetary appropriations had declined from 11 per cent to 5.5 per cent when Mr. Gorbachev had appeared on the scene and, with all due respect, Mr. Gorbachev had not once mentioned education while he was in power. Mr. Gorbachev, who was known for his phenomenally good health, had not attended an all-Union congress of teaching staff because of a sore throat; in 1987 at a plenum of the Communist Party Congress at which education was discussed, he had spoken about perestroika, not education. At present, by decision of the Belarusian Supreme Council, 10 per cent of the national budget of Belarus was devoted to education.

7. Replying to Mrs. Ider's question about the teaching of ideological subjects, he said that article 4 (2) of the draft of the new Constitution of Belarus stated that it could not be compulsory for any citizen of the Republic to study the ideology of any political party or religious or other social organization. Education was being depoliticized. Purely ideologically oriented subjects, such as the history of the Communist Party, had been dropped from curricula.

8. Mrs. Ider had also remarked that in a number of countries education was becoming unpopular and had asked if that was also true in Belarus. In fact, learning was a stressful occupation bringing no immediate rewards, and was imposed on people at an age when they did not fully understand what it offered them. Today it was found that income increased in proportion to education. Nevertheless, education was not popular and resistance to it was inherent in individuals.

9. In reply to Mr. Fofana concerning the equality of teachers in public and private education, he said that equality was impossible because the number of

teachers in private schools in relation to numbers of students was much higher and they were consequently paid more. If private schools did not pay more than State schools they would not exist.

10. He thanked Mr. Konate for having pointed out a statistical paradox in his statement by asking how personal income could increase when production was declining and prices were increasing. He had relied on official State figures showing that monetary income had increased over one year by 6.1 per cent, but in fact that figure was incorrect. It was only the mass of money in circulation that had expanded: real income could not have increased when it had been possible to buy twice as much for 300 roubles as could now be bought for 3,000 roubles. According to the press, monetary income had increased 6.5 times over the last three quarters of a year, but the figures for increases in wages told nothing about increases in real income. On his return to Belarus he would tell the statistics office not to publish such figures.

11. He had already answered Mr. Konate's question about the depoliticizing of education. In reply to the question on whether the old educational system had been retained or a new one introduced, he said that in general the old system had been maintained, but that education as it had existed in the 1950s and 1960s was being reviewed, and the changes introduced in the 1960s were now being dropped. The old system had not been changed because it was not all bad; rather the system was being restored to what had been taken as an example by other countries, bearing in mind achievements that had been made in the meantime.

12. He had already explained why the study of Russian was compulsory. Russian and Byelorussian were very close as languages and Byelorussia (White Russia) had always been part of Russia. If the Russian language were dropped the country would suffer a great loss: 90 per cent of the population spoke or understood Russian, and most people spoke Russian better than Byelorussian. Byelorussian had been introduced as the official language to prevent it from dying out as a result of the dissemination of Russian; it was now enjoying a revival and bilingualism was being imposed. Neither alternative to bilingualism was acceptable; suppressing a language was a violation of human rights. As a civil servant, he had to read and write Byelorussian, but once on the street he wanted to be free to speak any language he wished. For teaching purposes not only Russian but another language was necessary: if he had his way, school leavers would not receive a diploma without a knowledge of Russian and one other widely spoken foreign language. At present about 80 per cent of children in secondary schools were taught English, and in many schools German was also taught, particularly since unification.

13. Chernobyl had been a great disaster and an enormous obstacle to normal development, involving serious financial implications. Although the disaster had not taken place on its territory, Belarus had suffered 50 per cent of the total damage and the after-effects had not yet been fully studied. Radiation sickness and related ailments were increasing.

14. In conclusion, his delegation thanked the Committee for givings its attention to the difficult problems faced by Belarus in its transitional period.

15. The CHAIRMAN said that in the absence of specific follow-up questions, the present phase of the consideration of the second periodic report of Belarus (E/1990/7/Add.5) was now completed. In accordance with its usual practice, the Committee would make its concluding observations on another day, and representatives of Belarus could be present if they so wished.

16. Mr. Gornak (Belarus) withdrew.

ORGANIZATION OF WORK (agenda item 2) (continued)

17. The CHAIRMAN, confirming the arrangement whereby the sessional working group would meet the following week on 30 November, 1 and 2 December, said that the arrangement was due to the last-minute withdrawal of four States. That withdrawal had caused considerable difficulty, and disincentives might have to be considered for such withdrawals in the future. With regard to the additional session of the Committee scheduled for May 1993, he suggested that a report might not have to be adopted for that session until the ninth session in November-December 1993. Such a procedure would be consistent with the practice of most committees and would enable the Committee not only to deal with all the reports on its agenda but to consider the situation of some States that had never reported. A decision would have to be taken within the next two days in order to give the sessional working group the task of drawing up a preliminary list of questions relating also to those States that had never reported. That would enable the Committee to indicate to those States its intention of considering their situations and give them reasonable time to respond.

18. Mr. SIMMA said that if the sessional working group meeting the following week was to do the work of the pre-sessional working group, he did not see how the Committee could do its homework. He had been put in charge of the reports by Australia and Canada for the May 1993 session and had seen them only the previous Friday. He would not have time to do any research before the beginning of the following week. He therefore suggested that the pre-sessional working group might be held at the same time as the seminar scheduled for late January 1993 on indicators on economic and social rights. The working group might meet during the seminar, which lasted a whole week.

19. The CHAIRMAN said that the time allotted for the seminar on indicators could not be reduced, but perhaps the five members present for the seminar could have full working facilities to act as a pre-sessional working group for one day. If the members were prepared with a refined list of draft questions, the work of the pre-sessional working group might be completed in one day.

20. Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAN was concerned that the secretariat servicing the seminar would find it difficult to cope with servicing a pre-sessional meeting in addition to the seminar.

21. The CHAIRMAN said that the seminar would not be serviced by the Committee Secretariat but by another team so that the Committee Secretariat could be available if requested to service the pre-sessional group on the day it met.

22. Mr. RATTRAY asked whether it would be possible to use the time made available by the arrangements proposed to deal with the additional information submitted by Jamaica on the afternoon of Wednesday, 2 December.

23. The CHAIRMAN said that would not be possible if the discussions on Tuesday and Wednesday, 1 and 2 December, were held as proposed in a working group since any consideration of additional information had to take place in plenary session.

24. Mr. SIMMA said that the matters to be discussed on those days - general comments, the optional protocol and the Conference on Human Rights - were of such importance that it would be desirable for all members of the Committee to be present during the deliberations.

25. The CHAIRMAN therefore suggested that the discussions on Tuesday and Wednesday, 1 and 2 December, should be in plenary session; that would also allow the discussion of the additional information from Jamaica, should time permit.

26. It was so decided.

27. The CHAIRMAN asked whether the Committee could agree that he should explore the possibility of setting aside one day during the seminar for five Committee members to act as a pre-sessional working group to finalize the list of questions.

28. It was so agreed.

29. The CHAIRMAN said he had already commented at an earlier meeting on the fact that the country files prepared for Committee members by the Secretariat contained no information from non-governmental sources. The Committee had clearly indicated on a number of occasions its inability to carry out its work effectively in the absence of such information, which was, furthermore, unobtainable from the Library of the Palais des Nations, or from the Centre for Human Rights, which had no library or documentation facilities. It was deplorable that at a time when Governments were agreed that information from non-governmental sources was acceptable in forums such as the present Committee that the Centre for Human Rights was unable to provide it. He intended to propose a strong statement on the subject for insertion in the Committee's report.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.